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SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: POLITICAL ACTIVISTS AND MPS HOPE
FOR GREATER REFORMS IN "NEW ERA"

REF: KUWAIT 303 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Summary and comment: As Shaykh Sabah took the Amiri oath on January 29, leading political activists and parliamentarians (MPs) met to welcome the "new era" and call for greater political and economic reforms. In a Kuwait Graduates Society seminar entitled, "What Do We Want from the New Era," Ahmed Deyain, a liberal writer and one of the keynote speakers, presented a paper listing hoped for reforms, which Saoud Al-Anizi, the moderator, told Poloff would form the basis of a reform agenda Kuwait's political associations would present to the new Amir. Other political activists participating in the discussion also expressed hope that long stalled reforms would gain momentum under Shaykh Sabah, however, some cautioned against being overly optimistic. Human rights activist Dr. Ghanem Al-Najar cited entrenched corruption, economic prosperity, and political apathy as the greatest obstacles to reform. Moderate Islamist MP Dr. Nasser Al-Sane said the composition of the new Cabinet would indicate the new Government's commitment to reform; he was not hopeful there would be substantive changes. In his first speech to the nation, aired the evening of January 30, Shaykh Sabah lauded his predecessors and called for cooperation and "hard work," but did not outline a specific reform agenda. End summary.

Mixed Views on Potential for Reform

¶2. (SBU) Some of Kuwait's leading political activists participated in the discussion, "What Do We Want from the New Era," hosted by the Kuwait Graduates Society on January 29, the day Shaykh Sabah was sworn in as the new Amir. Keynote speakers Ahmed Deyain, a liberal writer, and Dr. Ghanem Al-Najar, an internationally renowned human rights activist, argued that Parliament's prominent role in resolving the recent leadership controversy had created an "historic moment" to usher in stalled political and economic reforms. Deyain presented a list of key reforms he hoped would be adopted by the new Government, which the moderator, Saoud Al-Anazi, told Poloff would form the basis of a document to be submitted to the Amir by Kuwait's political associations (see para 9 below for a full translation). Calling for more transparent and accountable government, Deyain said, "We want our Ministers to be statesmen" with real decision-making power. He also emphasized the need to reform the "corrupt electoral system" to "combat vote-buying and transference of votes from one district to another," and to legalize the formation of political parties. While hopeful reforms would be implemented, Dr. Al-Najar was less optimistic about the potential for change, citing entrenched corruption, economic prosperity, and political apathy as the greatest obstacles. He also lamented the relative weakness of liberal, reform movements compared to conservative, Islamist associations.

13. (SBU) Responding to the keynote speakers' comments, Ahmad Al-Nafisi, owner of the liberal weekly Al-Taleea, noted that "for the first time, one of the royal family members talked about 'constitutional legitimacy.'" He said a "consensus" had emerged on the need for political change, but emphasized political groups must cooperate to implement the reform agenda outlined by Deyain. Dr. Sajid Al-Abdali, the Secretary General of the Ummah (Nation) Party, a

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controversial, conservative Islamist political association, argued that "democracy is taken, not granted," and stressed the futility of waiting for the Government to initiate change. Abdullah Al-Naibari, a former MP and the Secretary General of the Kuwait Democratic Forum, a liberal political association, highlighted the role "political elites" could, and should, play in transforming the reform paper presented by Deyain into a real political agenda. Other leading activists agreed influential individuals and political associations should be more involved in promoting needed reforms.

14. (SBU) Dr. Nasser Al-Sane, a moderate Islamist MP affiliated with the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, cautioned against being overly optimistic. If there were no serious change in the composition of the new Government, there would be little reason to hope political reforms would be implemented, he argued. Al-Sane called on Kuwait's political associations to meet the same week to develop a reform strategy that would "send a clear message to the Amir."

15. (U) Among the approximately 60 people attending the discussion were: Ali Al-Baghli, a former Oil Minister and a Shi'a activist; Dr. Haila Al-Mekami, a Professor of Political

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Science at Kuwait University; Mohammed Al-Dallal, the Political Relations Chief for the ICM; Faisal Al-Hajji, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor; Abdul Karim Haider, a liberal lawyer; Loulwa Al-Mulla, the Secretary General of the Women's Social and Cultural Society; and women activists Naima Al-Shayji and Maha Al-Barges. The event was covered by Al-Jazeera and Kuwait Television.

MPs Laud Shaykh Sabah; Call for Reform...

16. (U) Many MPs similarly called on Shaykh Sabah during his swearing in to implement greater reforms. Shi'a MP Dr. Hassan Jowhar said, "Reform should be the title of this new era. No one should be above the law." MP Abdullah Al-Roumi argued that the "constitution should remain the basis for reforms." Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee Mohammed Al-Sager echoed these calls for reform and urged Shaykh Sabah "to appoint a Crown Prince immediately" to avoid another succession crisis. Deputy National Assembly Speaker Meshari Al-Anjari told reporters after the session, "We face two major issues (in the upcoming period): reform and counter-corruption...reform in the social, economic, and political aspects, and corruption in all its forms."

...But Some Fear Social Impact

17. (U) Not everyone shares this hope for reform. In an informal survey of Kuwaiti reactions to Shaykh Sabah becoming Amir, the English-daily Kuwait Times, which labeled Shaykh Sabah "Amir of Reforms," reported January 30 that many fear greater freedoms could lead to an erosion of conservative social values. One female teacher said, "What I am scared of is a rapid growth of freedom in terms of discos, nightclubs, and alcohol. Kuwait was always a religious country and freedom doesn't mean disobeying God." A "young Kuwaiti man" expressed a similar opinion, saying, "I don't want Kuwait to

be a free country like Dubai." A young woman "in her early 20s" who works for the National Bank of Kuwait said, "Kuwait is a religious country and we must stick to our traditions and habits. I feel that Kuwait will really develop economically and politically and this is what we need, not freedom in drinking and dancing." Another Kuwaiti man was quoted as saying, "Shaykh Sabah loves the country and he understands that most of the country is against illegal and negative freedoms." One "famous Kuwaiti artist" said, "We want Kuwait to be free, but to an extent. We all have children and we don't want them to end up failing their schools or even becoming drug addicts." (Comment: While this survey does not necessarily reflect the majority view, it does reveal some of the entrenched social attitudes that hinder implementation of political and economic reforms. End comment.)

Nothing New Yet in Shaykh Sabah's Address to the Nation

18. (SBU) In a pre-taped speech aired the evening of January 30, Shaykh Sabah called on Kuwaitis to cooperate with the government to ensure "equality in terms of rights and duties while preserving democracy and the freedom of expression with no discrimination between men and women as they are all equal by law and upon their shoulders lies the responsibility of serving and developing the homeland." Appealing to Kuwaitis to consider themselves soldiers, he added, "I look forward to see that we all put our hands together to begin a new era of serious work." He also praised the late Shaykh Jaber and the previous Amir Shaykh Saad, who was forced to step aside by Parliament, for their contribution to the country, and promised to follow their distinguished examples.

Reform Agenda Presented By Ahmed Deyain

19. (U) Begin text of paper presented by Ahmed Deyain at Kuwait Graduates Society on January 30:

The new era which starts today faces challenges and responsibilities, but high hopes are pinned on it. This new era necessitates the appointment of management for the country that is capable of understanding and dealing with these challenges. There are also responsibilities relating to political reform, which has become the key slogan for the current changes in the region, and to the necessity of building a strategic development vision for the future of Kuwait, for economic reform, for educational reform, for the overhauling of laws, for reforming governmental management,

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and for addressing outstanding and overdue issues, such as the Bidoon problem.

What do we want from the new era? We want the distinguished royal family to turn over a new leaf by rallying around and supporting the representatives of constitutional legitimacy, turning over the page of the past. We want a new methodology in the management of the state based on a revival of the project for building the modern Kuwaiti state pursuant to the 1962 constitution and reconciliation between the "ruling scheme" and the "construction of the state scheme." We want to select political management which corresponds to the spirit, challenges, and reform requirements of the new era and is in line with the nation's aspirations and hopes. We want new political management with a new mentality and new blood, with appointments to government posts based on competence and integrity, not political "shares."

We hope the new era will start with the activation of the explanatory memorandum with respect to the traditional consultations preceding the appointment of the new Prime Minister. (Note: Shaykh Sabah is expected to begin the customary two-to-three day consultation period on February 5. End note.) We hope the new leadership will break with the

traditional monopoly of decision making and political power, starting with the formation of the (new) Cabinet, which should be composed of both ruling family members and citizens. The function of the Cabinet should also be changed to give it a complete role as a constitutional institution and a decision-making Executive. We want out ministers to be statesmen, and not just Executive puppets waiting for directives and focused only on managing their specific ministries.

The new Government, despite its short tenure before the 2007 parliamentary elections, will shoulder great and extraordinary responsibilities. It is a Government that will be involved in approving a new Crown Prince in less than a year and in running the 2007 parliamentary elections; the Government will give the first impressions of the new era.

We also hope that the new era will meet the nation's demand to reform the corrupt electoral system by going back to ten constituencies. (Note: There are currently 25 constituencies.) We hope the Elections Law will be strictly enforced and vote-buying and vote-transferring (from one district to another) will be seriously combated. We look forward with hope to Government-Parliament cooperation to repeal laws restricting public freedoms and to enact alternative, more democratic laws, such as the Public Meetings and Gatherings Law, to permit citizens the constitutional freedom to meet; the NGOs Law, to ensure the freedom to form civil society institutions, which can practice activities without government custodianship; the Administrative Court Law, to ensure that the Administrative Court's judicial authority extends to administrative decisions, which violate existing laws or provide for exceptions, regardless of whether or not the law has to do with licensing dailies, places to worship, or nationality; and the Constitutional Court Law, to allow Kuwaiti citizens to challenge the unconstitutionality of laws directly at the Constitutional Court.

We hope the new era will also witness the granting of greater freedom for political activities and respect for pluralism by introducing a law giving citizens the right to form political parties. We hope for greater Government-Parliament cooperation on the ratification of the financial accountability law, on removing corrupt elements from Government positions, and on countering all vote-buying activities during grillings (questioning of Ministers), voting on laws, and no-confidence votes on ministers. We hope the new era will affirm the principle of the sovereignty of the law and ensure the independence of the judicial power.

We hope to see in the new era a balanced relationship between the various political currents and the Government's abandonment of a policy aimed at marginalizing the lively powers in the Kuwaiti society. We want the new era to instill the spirit of openness in our society. We want a solution to the Bidoon problem. We want to reform our backwards educational system. We want a comprehensive reassessment of the role of the Higher Planning and Development Council to make its key function the development and implementation of a strategic development vision for Kuwait for the next 25 years.

Doesn't "development" deserve a "Government" whose key

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occupation is "development"?

End text.

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